Not-Quite-Live Entertainment

Pizza Place Purveys Pizzazz

By Diane Stafford
Star Business & Financial Writer

The management doesn't want you to get the idea that its pizza isn't good enough to sell itself. But unless you've been to Disneyland, you won't believe the entertainment hauled out to help market the area's newest restaurant.

Those familiar with Disney's Country Bear Jamboree are a step up on less traveled folk, who should be suitably awed at the opening March 2 of ShowBiz Pizza Place in the Antioch Shopping Center.

The first of a fledgling chain of restaurants planning to make its headquarters here, Showbiz goes 10 Twentieth Century steps beyond the straw-hatted, banjo-plucking entertainment previously offered by a pizza purveyor.

At ShowBiz, families will be served 70 electronic games in one room of the 8,000-square-foot facility, and, in another room, the *piece de resistance*: a five-piece, not-quite-live animated animal band.

Billy Bob, a six-foot-tall bear, and his four cohorts, the Wolfpack Five, are a computerized, three-dimensional combo installed to entertain diners.

Performing with Billy Bob are Fats Gorilla, a simian pianist; Dingo Starr, the doggie drummer; Wolfman, the wolf sounds like the famed announcer Wolfman Jack and acts as the emcee; and Mini Mozzarella, a mousey rendition of Minnie Pearl.

The Wolfpack is the creation of Aaron Fechter, wunderkind inventor who at 26 heads his own company, Creative Engineering Inc.

The Orlando, Fla., company is the birthplace of Fechter's "Electronimation" entertainment shows. Believed to be the only commercial competitor of the Disney empire in this type of animation, Creative Engineering began selling its shows to amusement parks about three years ago.

The company, with its own design, sculpture, music, electronics and mechanics departments, has sold about 20 shows to amusement parks worldwide. Parks that may be familiar to area residents include King's Dominion in Virginia; Magic World in Tennessee; and Americana in Ohio.

At a trade show last November of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions, Creative Engineering came to the attention of Topeka Inn Management Inc. A month later, TIM had exclusive rights to the Wolfpack Five, as far as the restaurant business is concerned.

ShowBiz Pizza will be owned and operated by a newly created company, with TIM owning 80 percent and Creative Engineering, 20 percent.

TIM is the nation's largest franchisee of Holiday Inns and the first developer of the Holiday Inn Holidome concept, an indoor family entertainment center.

Stan Emerson, a TIM publicity agent in Topeka, calls ShowBiz Pizza Place "a logical extension" of the company's interests.

Why a pizza restaurant?

"Pizza is obviously a popular food, but the main concept here is entertainment," Emerson said. "You have a natural waiting period with pizza, so while waiting for family food you get family entertainment."

In a telephone interview from Orlando, where he was putting finishing touches on the programming for the Wolfpack Five, Fechter placed the value of his animated troupe at $200,000—a sum that Emerson noted "could build another restaurant."

The new company is confident the Wolfpack will croon its way into the hearts of area diners while the pizza is wending its way to their stomachs. The Antioch Shopping Center facility is to be one of three ShowBiz restaurants in the Kansas City area, with others planned for 107th and Metcalf in Johnson County and Noland Road in Independence.

Tom DeCoursey, a local publicity agent for the restaurant, said other ShowBiz facilities are scheduled to open this year in Orlando and Jacksonville, Fla.; Des Moines; Chicago; New Orleans; and Baton Rouge, La. Subsequent openings are planned in Tulsa, Omaha, Topeka and Chicago, he said.

The Antioch center location, former site of a grocery store, also will be the national training center for ShowBiz employees.

With the style of an inventor at ease with his product, Fechter offered assurances about the animated band and their sometimes-humorous, sometimes-musical shows:

"The training required to operate them isn't very extensive. They're designed so the end user only has to press a button. Plus, there's a step-by-step technique to find out what's wrong, if something does go wrong. If there's an emergency, we can have someone there in minutes."

Creative Engineering has designed six different shows for the Antioch restaurant, each running about four minutes long. Additional shows will follow, said Melvin Fechter, company treasurer, who said he actually prefers the title "Dad."

"Aaron lives at the plant—really, he has a room here," "Dad" said. "He puts in 18 hours a day on the job, so why not live here."

The rapid pace of the TIM negotiations and restaurant development, the senior Fechter said, accelerated the company's normal schedule, which has been to take about six months to turn out new characters and new shows.

"It basically takes the same time to make one new character as it takes to make a hundred of it," he said. "Each has to go through fiberglass, mechanics, artwork, programming steps that have to be done successively. Aaron and the mechanics department are working on standardization procedures now that will speed up the process."

Aaron Fechter said he'll put his creations up against Disney characters any day as far as quality is concerned. And, he said, he'd wager that his shows will be "better accepted by the public because we have a more up-tempo pace. We've got rock and roll from the '50s and '60s."

Oh yes, ShowBiz also will feature a salad bar, soft drinks and beer.

Computerized combos liven up ShowBiz Pizza Places

Billy Bob is only one of Aaron Fechter's creations

Wolfpack Creator Is Whizkid

By Diane Stafford
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A few words about Aaron Fechter, the 26-year-old whizkid creator of the Wolfpack Five:

At age 4, he took radios apart. At 5, he put them back together. A grade-school TV repair business closed because he "couldn't lift the sets." In early high school he started a fire in his bedroom with an electrical invention.

Fechter was graduated from the University of South Florida at age 19. His degree was in finance because he found engineering "kind of bored (him) at the college level."

Once out of school, he sold real estate to earn money for a patent search on a new kind of electronic relay. In 1974, he built a car that carried two people and got 90 miles to the gallon. He invented a low-cost swimming pool cleaner powered by a garden hose.

Six years ago, he organized Creative Engineering Inc. as a "think tank," handling such troubling engineering tasks as washing oranges. Five years ago, he built his first animated show and began assembling a team of computer programmers, costumer designers, writers, musicians, artists and sound technicians.

What's ahead?

"I think 'Electronimation' will end up in nightclubs as entertainment for adults," Fechter said. "I think, eventually, we can program characters for drama, for plays, like a serious performance of Shakespeare. But that's way in the future. Before that, we may need comical performances of Shakespeare to accustom audiences to the idea."

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